

Chapter 4

How Frank met his former bartender, Les Payne, and what ensued

Moved to generosity by his recent good fortune, Frank gave his two hundred dollars to the convulsing beggar. The man's eyes moved from the bills to the hand that offered them, then up the arm all the way to Frank's face.

The beggar laughed and embraced Frank, calling him by name. "Don't you recognize your old bartender? It's me, Les Payne!"

"Les? What wretched misfortune has led you to this fate? Have you any news of Missile-Tits, my beloved wife?"

"I am at the end of my strength!" Les gasped. Frank took him to the well-appointed home kept by Neil, Bill, and Carl. There, Frank brought down bread from the kitchen and they ate on the stoop. Once Les perked up, Frank pressed him.

"Well? What news of my darling Missile-Tits?"

"Frank- "

"Why do you have that look? What c- "

"She's dead."

"WHAT!?"

"She's dead."

"That's ridiculous! She was in the prime of health! We've all seen it!"

"Her brother and their parents, too. When your wife got her family lawyers involved in your defense, the company firm knew they were out-matched. None can say with any certainty what happened or why, but Missile-Tits' suits were dropped before her body even turned cold. No plaintiff, no case, they said."

Frank despaired. "Oh, best of all possible worlds, where are you?" he shouted. "When the machinery of justice fails us so utterly, how can we hold to faith?" Payne hunched his shoulders and frowned in solidarity with Frank's grief, his sores oozing at his neck and hands. "And what of yourself, Les? How did you come to this meager state?"

"Frank, the work of raising spirits incurs a special kind of tired. While showing our friends the way to the best of all possible worlds, I learn everything there is to know about the worst of all possible pains. One of our friends was a lovely woman, in great pain, and together we reached for joy and found it! Yet our sojourns left me with AIDS, now so well advanced that I have adopted the fatal indulgence of opiate addiction as a means of relief."

Frank took a moment to ponder these revelations, then mused aloud. "It seems a miserable betrayal by the best of all possible worlds, to repay you thus for bringing so many to its appreciation."

"Oh, not at all!" Les replied. "These AIDS and opioid epidemics have been indispensable in revealing the prejudices of the people at large, and the abusive practices of the pharmaceutical corporations. Each has pushed more and more people to embrace our humble optimism. After all, it's the best means of combating the grief brought on by the suffering and death these plagues create in such abundance! Why, events could not have unfolded any other way. In fact, for every smiling face you meet in the course of your day, there might be counted a dozen or more tragic deaths from these plagues among their loved ones!"

"That's admirable," said Frank, "but you must be cured."

"How can I be?" asked Les Payne. "I am penniless, and the cost of the treatments for my condition comes to more than most people earn in a year!"

This statement decided Frank. He returned to Neil and Bill and Carl, and told them Les Payne's tragic tale, asking if they might assist his friend. Neil pointed out: "AIDS and opioid addiction cannot truly be cured, but AIDS can be managed with proper treatment, and addiction held at bay with vigilance and compassion."

Bill explained, "There's no reason either course of treatment should cost so much. We could likely make some headway for our patient with help from our friends and the materials at hand, providing the proof of concept for a low-cost model."

Carl opined, "The act of aiding even one such person's recovery reduces the total suffering in the world, while reinvigorating a

productive individual, thereby enhancing the sum of all goodness.”

They took Les Payne in to the well-appointed home, and applied their learning and their vigilance. In the end, Les was left scarred and somewhat fragile, but otherwise much improved. Neil and Bill and Carl employed him in the maintenance of their laboratory, as the particulars departed little from operating a bar.

With Les as caretaker, and Frank the technician, Neil and Bill and Carl had time to branch out. They determined to host a conference in Houston. Long before everyone had accepted climate change as a disruptive (if not desperate!) reality, Houston had been volatile. Suffering the most tornadoes in all of Texas, that shining city also boasted the only snow-removal fleet on the gulf coast, and was furthermore dependable for at least one hurricane per season. It was a natural place for Frank's employers and their friends to reach out with their sufficient reason, demonstrating cause and effect, to bring some hearts and minds closer to the solution.

They booked a flight, and brought their assistants with them. Frank had been discouraged by the bus, yet conditions on the airplane distressed him even further. Stuffed between strangers, to where one cannot stand or stretch out one's feet? His jail cell had been more luxurious!

Neil and Bill were famous, and had learned that flying coach made everyone else uncomfortable, so they sat first class. Frank and Les, however, had been tucked into disparate middle seats near the rear lavatory, unable to converse without waking their fellow passengers. Les unbuckled and apologized and climbed over the prodigious lap of his corpulent seat-mate to make his way to the fore, where he engaged Neil and Bill in a discussion of cause and effect, and the best of all possible worlds. Les posited that even now, all was for the very best.

Neil appeared about to dissent, but Bill overrode him in a passion. He gestured with his hands and spoke with animation. “My dear assistant, if that were so, we would have no need to host this convention! We could simply sit back and breathe in the sweet musk of spent petroleum, as so many do. Yet this is an ABDICATION!” Bill slapped his hand around the wide and sturdy first class arm rest, giving his sufficient reason percussive reinforcement. “Our very purpose lies in finding knowledge, and sharing it. We have done so. Indeed, we have gone to great lengths to do so! When people fail to use that knowledge to preserve and advance their own well-being, we feel compelled to act. To speak more clearly. To sport ever more compelling neck-wear. To engage with everyone, for the benefit of all!”

Bill was getting worked up. Neil leaned in from his seat across the aisle. Somehow, his belly stopped short of disrupting the champagne, blueberries, and scrambled eggs upon his tray. “Think of it this way. For two billion years, all the Uranium on earth sat in deposits underground, making little radioactive patches, nothing truly significant. Then people started digging it up and spinning it down and topping it off, and now every human being lives with the horrific understanding that at any moment, one asshole could incinerate the whole planet at the touch of a button, and that will be true as long as our society survives.

“And, AND! It will likely be the thing to bring about its end. And that's another horrific understanding that everybody lives with, and that wisdom informs our belief in our own potential as humans. Today, this is who we are; the idiot ape with our collective fate subject to a moment's passion. So which is the better world, the one with the little pockets, or the one with the big button?”

“It was a necessary part of - oh, by the way, where is Carl?”

Neil smiled patiently. “Carl doesn't travel well. If the threat of total thermo-nuclear annihilation doesn't give you pause, I might contrast the accounting practices of ancient Phoenicia with those implemented by our banking system today. Did you know that the Bible expressly forbids collecting interest? Do you know why? I understand our friend Frank ran afoul of usurious practices, himself.”

Les held forth, undeterred. “Frank's altitudinous loss is certainly regrettable, but absolutely necessary! Such individual misfortunes create general welfare, so that the more individual misfortunes that occur, the more that all is well.”

As Les reasoned thus, the “Fasten-Seatbelt” light came on, and a flight attendant appeared to help him back to his seat. The captain had a wondrously pleasing burr to his voice, and he leaned in to it as Les buckled up.

“gAahh... Folks? We've got aaaaaa bit of patchy weather, between us and Houston, aahhhh, so things might get aah, well? Aaaaaaaaaa little bit bumpee.”